



Republican Policy Committee

Don Nickles, Chairman Doug Badger, Staff Director 347 Russell Senate Office Building (202)224-2946

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President Clinton Plays the Environment Card

"Under cover of balancing the budget, the Republican Congress is going after the essential environmental protections that have guaranteed the health and safety of all Americans for a long time now, and I am determined to stop them."
[President Clinton, weekly radio address, November 4, 1995]

The President, continuing to play from the hand he dealt himself in August [see RPC paper, "Clinton Attacks Republican Environmental Reforms," 8/16/95], used the forum of last week's radio address to shift attention away from his own budget balancing failures by peddling fear to his listeners in the form of imaginary Republican environmental atrocities, such as "letting more dangerous arsenic into our drinking water, and allowing raw sewage on our beaches."

These charges are just the latest blast from the Clinton Administration's alarmism machine aimed at shouting down Republican efforts to get the federal budget and federal regulatory programs under control. In playing this rhetorical trump card, the President is laying the groundwork for using Republican environmental initiatives as an excuse to veto upcoming balanced budget legislation.

This latest sound-off is in concert with the efforts of Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt, and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Carol Browner, who have been relentless in their verbal attacks on Republican environmental initiatives. However, the President's success in using the environmental card as a basis for vetoing a Republican balanced budget depends on whether he can convincingly portray himself as an environmental and budget centrist simply by painting congressional Republicans as extremists. The November 4 radio address is a prime example of this strategy in action. In his address, the President falsely characterized Republican legislative efforts as extremist and alarming: "This budget will mean dirtier water, more smog, more illness and a diminished quality of life."

As the President well knows, it is difficult to combat fear mongering with mere facts. However, this strategy has not always worked for President Clinton in the past, and in the case of common sense environmental reform, may not work for him this time either. For example, during the debate on welfare reform, Republicans successfully made the case, in response to charges from the Administration, that reforming welfare was not about punishing the poor, but

about fixing a failed government program that does more to perpetuate welfare dependence and poverty than to alleviate it. Senate Republicans passed a welfare reform bill with overwhelming bipartisan support because the public understood that the federal government's well-meaning programs were nonetheless creating a permanent welfare class. By the same token, reforming the Environmental Protection Agency is not about destroying the environment, it is about fixing a bloated, inefficient, and costly federal bureaucracy that is more interested in exercising monopoly control from Washington than in providing sensible solutions for Americans whose "environment" happens to lie outside the Capital Beltway.

President Clinton's demand that "protecting our environment can't be sacrificed to balance the budget" is deliberately designed to deflect the public's attention from two crucial concerns. The first is the fact that President Clinton is not interested in a balanced budget. He has never sent a balanced budget to Congress, and intends to veto any balanced budget Congress sends him, with or without environmental reform. The second concern the President is unwilling to address is that the American people want smaller government and regulatory relief, including relief from unnecessary and punitive environmental regulations.

No one disagrees that among our Nation's highest priorities should be the assurance of safe water, clean air, and a healthy natural environment. Neither Democrats nor Republicans in Congress are intent on abolishing needed environmental protections. However, Republicans in Congress *are* trying to rein in an out-of-control bureaucracy, that is more interested in self-preservation than environmental protection.

Clearly, the intensity of the White House rhetoric is directly proportional to this Administration's recognition that Republicans are seeking to diminish the size and power of the federal bureaucracy. The Administration is apoplectic over the fact that Republicans seek more reliance on experienced state and local regulators, and on environmental approaches that require far fewer intrusive and arrogant federal bureaucrats. Our approaches emphasize environmental protection based on cooperation not punishment, market-based incentives not command-and-control rules, flexible performance standards not prescriptive technology standards, and risk prioritization that would eliminate many programs seeking zero-risk levels for even insignificant risks.

In short, the President may opt to sacrifice balancing the budget in favor of protecting government bureaucracy, but, the fact of the matter is, environmental protection need not, and will not, be sacrificed for a balanced budget.

Staff Contact: Mark Whitenton, 224-2946

[See also RPC paper, "The Real Republican Agenda: Protect Our Environment, Not EPA's Flawed Regulatory Approach," 11/8/95, which provides talking points on the Republican vision for fixing the broken federal environmental program.]